



Inclusive Education in Jamaica: High School Teachers' Understanding, Experiences, Competencies, and Received Support

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Abstract

Every child deserves an equal opportunity to learn and participate in classroom activities without stigma. The 2019 draft of the Policy on Special Education in Jamaica advocates for an integrative, inclusive approach to address the diverse needs of all learners. However, not all teachers have received specialized training or resources to support each child. This research explored the experiences of sixteen high school teachers in accommodating inclusive education and the factors influencing their practices. Thematic analysis revealed that teachers' years of experience, lesson organization, personal initiative, and investigation contributed to creating inclusive classrooms. The study concluded that each teacher's experience with inclusive education is unique by context and student groups with a need for continuous training. Furthermore, the teachers' reliance on personal funds needs to be reduced. Future research could examine approaches to inclusive education at other academic levels using a longitudinal study design.

Keywords: policy, special education, teachers' experiences, inclusive education, teachers' competency, support

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Article information

Received date: 05/03/2025;

Reviewed: 15/03/2025;

Revised date: 14/05/2025;

Accepted date: 15/05/2025

How to cite this article: Williams, D. G. L., Dossou, S. R. (2025) 'Inclusive Education in Jamaica: High School Teachers' Understanding, Experiences, Competencies and Received Support', *Journal of Classroom Practices*, 4(1), 74-95. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.58197/qy6nfp59>

Introduction

Education is a critical component in all areas of life. For this reason, there have always been actions to improve the teaching-learning process after elementary school to make sure there is a solid foundation for future years of schooling (Sanni, Fatima, and Sajinu, 2021). At present, the Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth and Information (MoESYI) is guided by "Each child can learn... Every child must learn," Task Force on Education (2004: 29). Thus, each child, in any situation, has the capacity to learn, and that child must learn despite the situation.

According to Liasidou (2015), the globalization era is increasingly dominated by concepts of educational inclusion focused primarily on individual rights to economic opportunity and social mobility, which vastly expands the parameters of past notions of inclusion with important policy implications. The key outcome goal for education is "an education which facilitates life-long learning and acquisition of social and life skills for all" (Task Force, 2004: 6). One important recommendation of its was that children with special needs should be included in regular classrooms.

According to Lumpkin (2013), as cited in Brissett (2019), 6.3 % of Jamaica's population has some type of disability. Within this population, there is a group of children who are of school age and are enrolled in educational institutions. Additionally, based on the disability, some children are enrolled in specific special education institutions, while others are integrated within mainstream school systems where these students' needs are catered to in an environment that facilitates inclusive education without prejudice or bias (Task Force, 2004).

The Policy on Special Education in Jamaica (Overview)

The draft of the Policy on Special Education in Jamaica was tabled in parliament in 2019 (Jamaica Information Service, 2019). This came out of an urgency for the education system to respond to the educational needs of the nation's children (Ministry of Education, Jamaica, 2017). While there was a unit responsible to monitor the education of children with exceptionalities, the government of Jamaica, through MoESYI in developing this policy formalised and evaluated the country's existing national goals in Vision 2030, the recommendations from the Task Force on Education Reform, the National Education Strategic Plan, the National Standards Curriculum (NSC), and the Alternative Pathway to Secondary Education (APSE).

The policy has two goals: 1. To promote equity and access to educational opportunities for children and youth with special needs at all levels of the education system, and 2. To promote a system of inclusive education where possible, recognizing that some children may be best served in segregated facilities or home-based programmes (Ministry of Education, 2017). Also included in this policy are definitions that are critical to the understanding of special education, components (for example, provision for early childhood, primary, and secondary education, support), and the guiding curriculum. Throughout this report, special education is to be understood as the educational provision for children whose functioning levels deviate from the established norm to the extent that specially designed educational programmes are necessary to facilitate or foster optimum learning (Ministry of Education, 2017: 13- 15). A disability is seen as a physical, sensory, cognitive, intellectual, mental illness or psychological condition, or various types of chronic disease that interferes with an individual's ability to develop normally, learn, or relate to others (Ministry of Education, 2017:12). According to UNESCO (2009), inclusive education is a process that involves the transformation of schools and other centres of learning to cater for all children – including boys and girls, students from ethnic and language minorities, rural populations, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and those with disabilities and difficulties learning, and to provide learning opportunities for all youth and adults as well.

The Task Force on Education Reform (2004) recommended that students with special needs who can be integrated into the mainstream education system should be. Mainstreaming is placing students with exceptionalities in general education classes while meeting their individual needs, whereas integration is the desegregation, organization, or combination of groups of students with and without

exceptionalities in mainstream educational settings (Ministry of Education, 2017:13, 15). The Policy on Special Education also added that support and intervention services will be given to the receiving institutions to aid in continuous development. From the National Strategic Plan, the goal of the MoESYI: "to develop a coherent, integrated education system that serves all clients equally, contributes to national development and supports Vision 2030" (Ministry of Education, Jamaica, 2012). Vision 2030 Jamaica - National Development Plan is guided by the motto "Jamaica, the place of choice to live, work, raise families, and do business" (Jamaica Information Service, 2010); Vision 2030 lists as goal number 1. Empower Jamaicans to achieve their fullest potential with the result of world-class education and training.

The NSC and APSE programmes inform the Policy on Special Education by outlining how differentiation and accommodation in instructional delivery will assist schools in meeting the learning needs of all students (Ministry of Education, Jamaica, 2017). Additionally, APSE was designed to create a system for every student to leave high school with knowledge, competencies, skills, and attitudes that will have students ready for the work force (School -to-Work Transition, as outlined by the policy), or to access tertiary level education (Ministry of Education, 2015).

In general, this policy on special education advocates for an integrative and/or inclusive approach that meets the needs of all learners so that, in the end, Jamaica can be the place of world-class education and training at all levels.

Statement of Problem

Education is a fundamental right for all, and this is affirmed in various treaties approved by the United Nations (Morris, 2021). With inclusive education now as an international mandate from UNESCO's policy on Special Education (UNESCO, 2009), countries had to make adjustments to adopt the mandate. Despite many developing countries' struggle with the implementation of inclusive education, it has become an international phenomenon (Samms, 2017). Consequently, Jamaica, through the Special Education Unit of the MoESYI, have drafted a policy to aid in carrying out inclusive education. However, teachers – as primary facilitators of classroom learning – have not all received specialized training to implement this well-needed change. With very little inclusion in schools and segregation of students with special needs, teachers in Jamaica have not experienced full inclusion and do not feel adequately equipped to facilitate it (Tomalin, 2019). After more than three years since the presentation of the policy, there is a need to explore the present situation, understanding, experiences, and competencies of teachers, as well as the support received to facilitate inclusive education. As such, there is a need to explore teachers' experiences in Jamaica with inclusive education to understand Jamaica's current situation from the teachers' perspective further.

Research Aim, Questions, and Significance

The primary aim of this research was to explore inclusive education in Jamaica – as part of the Policy on Special Education – high school teachers' understanding, experiences, competencies, and received support. This was to obtain a more in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, views on their competency, and whether schools give support in implementing inclusive education. This research study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are teachers' understanding of inclusive education?

2. How do teachers describe their experiences with inclusive education?
3. How competent do teachers feel in teaching for inclusive education?
4. How do schools support teachers in implementing inclusive education?

This study on inclusive education in Jamaica – high school teachers' understanding, experiences, competencies, and received support is of significance for the following reasons: Firstly, to bring awareness to the policy makers of how teachers – the primary implementers and or facilitators within the classroom setting – experience inclusive education at the secondary level; secondly, to highlight the areas of concern specific to teachers' feelings of competency and support given by Education Officers, other Ministry of Education Officials, and school administrators in implementing inclusive education; and finally, to further add to the forum of discussion that teachers are in need of seeing practical transition from policy that truly reflects the Jamaican context.

Literature Review

Education for All is strongly linked to "inclusive education" (UNESCO, 2009). Inclusive education is a phenomenon that continues to spark debate among teachers, administrators, and policymakers throughout the world (Boitumelo et al., 2020). As a result, inclusive education is a practical and transformative endeavor that must be the way of the future for the education of people with disabilities (Morris, 2021). Similarly, inclusive education is strongly established as the core educational policy for children with special educational needs and disabilities, which emerges as the means of creating an inclusive society in which equal opportunities are provided (Pappas et al., 2018). Mitchell (2015) mentioned that inclusive education is to educate learners with special educational needs in regular education settings, involving the transformation of schools to cater for all children. Hirshberg et al. (2023) added that a key factor for enabling inclusive education is to ensure that education plays a leading role in facilitating the creation of an inclusive society.

Inclusive Education

As defined by Mitchell (2015), inclusive education is a multi-faceted concept that requires educators at all levels of their systems to attend to vision, placement, adapted curriculum, adapted assessment, adapted teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources, and leadership. Norwich (2022) posited that inclusive education is multi-dimensional, ambiguous, and normative, which is related to the discussion about using inclusion as a thick or thin concept. Głodkowska (2020) also identified inclusive education as a complex and multi-dimensional process whose sources stem from normalizing the lives of people with disabilities.

Bariffe and Pittas (2021) indicated that inclusion is more than a way of practice; it is a way of belief and thinking. According to Glodkowska (2020), the main goal of educational inclusion is to introduce students with special educational needs into mainstream schools and create a learning environment in which they can fully realize their potential. Moreover, the goal of educating children with disabilities is the same as that of educating children without disabilities: to support children in reaching their full potential and leading productive lives as active members of their communities (Hayes and Bulat, 2017). As a result, all children feel equally valued in inclusive classrooms.

As simple as it seems, introducing an inclusive education is a long, responsible, and complex organizational and methodological process that requires weighted management decisions, basic research in various areas relating to the education of children with special educational needs, and, above all, respect for fundamental human rights (Martynchuk et al., 2022). Furthermore, people should consider their country's political, economic, and cultural traditions as the fundamental starting point to explore an appropriate mode of inclusive education (Zhang and Miao, 2022). According to Norwich (2022), inclusive education is where education communities and systems allow everyone to have a sense of belonging in every aspect while accommodating total participation and valuing them. It is noted that implementing inclusive education is a complex process that requires, besides the proper legislation, the involvement of various factors in decision-making (Pappas et al., 2018).

Teacher and Inclusive Education

UNESCO (2020) stated, "an important element of inclusive education involves ensuring that all teachers are prepared to teach all students. Inclusion cannot be realized unless teachers are empowered agents of change, with values, knowledge and attitudes that permit every student to succeed." (p.1). Particularly, "teachers need to comprehend that inclusion is about diversity and change in attitudes and instructional methods of teaching" (Marimuthu and Cheong, 2015: 318). Mangope et al. (2018) added that teacher attitudes toward inclusion are important to students' success in the inclusive environment, whether learning-disabled or in the general student population. The teacher will need to adjust his teaching in a different way. Instead of focusing only on specific skills and teaching strategies, teachers will need to develop a reflective attitude and inclusive values. Moreover, to ensure equity in education, teacher education policies need to have an explicit focus on inclusive education and culturally responsive pedagogy and would prepare pre-service teachers for working in schools with diverse groups of students, no matter their origin or cultural background (Hirshberg et al., 2023).

Bariffe and Pittas (2021) opined that successful inclusion demands increased physical and human resources and reliance on strategies and pedagogical procedures to secure learners' interest. Inclusive education requires well-equipped, knowledgeable, and competent teachers who can foster the required values, confidence, and support in disabled students, thus preparing them to become capable citizens (Marimuthu and Cheong, 2015).

Teachers' Experiences and Training

A key recommendation is that teacher trainers should ensure that student teachers, being prepared for entry into the teaching profession, are exposed to positive, inclusive experiences and equipped with relevant pedagogical skills around inclusive education as they progress through the special education program (Mangope et al., 2018). Also, teachers who value and respect their students understand that students with disabilities, if supported and given the opportunities, can achieve more than expected (Marimuthu and Cheong, 2015). The same authors concluded that inclusive education demands more positive beliefs and greater professional commitment. This is supported by "inclusive teaching requires teachers to recognize the experiences and abilities of every student, embrace the idea that each student's learning capacity is open-ended, and be open to diversity" (UNESCO, 2020:1).

Results of Bariffe and Pittas (2021) showed that teachers generally uphold positive beliefs towards inclusion and teaching experience influences practices and beliefs through formal training, but this

was insufficient to assist with the demands of inclusion. They noted that younger teachers with fewer years of experience, having limited exposure to special education and special needs children, display greater reluctance in their attitude towards the inclusion of children with autism (Bariffe and Pittas, 2021). The key findings of Boitumelo et al. (2020) revealed that teachers had limited experiences of inclusive education and limited understandings of what it entails in Botswana. By providing support for general and special education teachers who work with students with disabilities in an inclusive setting, positive social change may occur as schools strive to provide teachers with the appropriate resources they need to successfully educate students with disabilities in the general education classroom environment (Boitumelo et al., 2020). Therefore, good training for inclusive practices will bring success to inclusive education, which will lead to the modification of the thinking patterns of our society (Marimuthu and Cheong, 2015).

Support for Inclusive Education

Inclusive education requires teachers to constantly reflect on how children learn and participate in the classroom, school, and community. It also requires teachers to continuously reflect on accommodating the diversity of children's needs when teaching in mainstream settings. Inclusive education is therefore a dynamic process that requires continuous support and professional development for teachers (Ministry of Education, 2017). Inclusive education is not just about making adaptations within the classroom. It is about constant reflection and ongoing self-assessment within the school community of the barriers children might face in accessing quality education, and ways to remove those barriers. An inclusive teacher helps students develop self-confidence and self-esteem for good student achievement. However, special teacher training is crucial to ensure all children have access to quality education. Well-trained, supported, and motivated teachers can impact the participation and success of all children, especially children with disabilities who need extra encouragement and support to access learning. The implications of the framework on the attitudes, methods, and professionalism of teachers must be the priority of professional training.

Governments must make our education system inclusive to realize the right to inclusive education. As a result, governments can include teacher training for inclusion in their laws, policies, plans, programs, or regulations (UNESCO, 2020). Despite the merit of the teacher's role in the success of inclusive education, the intervention of other actors remains necessary, because their training is a powerful lever to facilitate the teacher's tasks and provide the conditions necessary to enhance student learning. It is for this reason that the attention of the teachers must be largely directed towards the inclusive classroom and the management of its activities, in accordance with the perspective of inclusive education, as a classroom where each learner is supposed to be able to find his place at the affective, cognitive, and social level.

This study was guided by the socio-constructivist theory of Lev Vygotsky, Spillane and colleagues' theory of policy implementation related to inclusive education. Social constructivism emphasizes that all cognitive functions, including learning, depend on interactions with others. Vygotsky (1968) and Al-Shammari et al. (2019) emphasized the social role of learning because of its impact on cognitive development through learning and interaction between children and their peers, parents, and teachers. Therefore, learning depends critically on the qualities of a collaborative process within an educational community that is situation-specific and context-bound. Vygotsky's theory of socio-constructivism describes learning as a social process and the origin of human intelligence in society.

Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition, and knowledge is built through interaction with others. Supporting the key role of communication in the socio-constructivist conception of learning, Vygotsky associates it with the zone of proximal development concept. This area represents the learning potential that the learner can reach due to a third party (peers, trainer, coach, mediator, teachers). It is intended to extend throughout life as the individual acquires.

Finally, Vygotsky shows us the way to get there. By respecting each child's "proximal zone of development," a teacher, adhering to the postulate of educability, will make them acquire the knowledge they must transmit to them. In this light, according to the theory of social constructivism, teachers should assume the position of "facilitators". One of the main focuses of social constructivism is the role that social interaction plays. Also, the social processes create knowledge. Vygotsky believed that learning and social context are inseparable. He asserted that all cognitive functions begin as a product of social interactions.

Social constructivism requires a primary element of two or more students. These students engage in some form of knowledge-building interaction. Thus, the work of Spillane et al. (2002) on the cognitive processes involved in the implementation of policies could contribute to a better understanding of the individual factors influencing the management and appropriation of change by school actors.

Methodology

This research study was designed to explore inclusive education in Jamaica – high school teachers' understanding, experiences, competencies, and to receive support to gain a more in-depth insight into this phenomenon in the Jamaican context. This section was organized to inform readers of the research approach's rationale, entry and access, sites and settings, participants and sampling strategy, data collection and analysis techniques, trustworthiness and ethical considerations, and methodological limitations.

Research Approach

A qualitative approach was undertaken to achieve the aim of the study. This approach allowed exploration of meanings given to events, thoughts, participants, and experiences of concepts or phenomenon (Creswell 2014; Denzin and Lincoln as cited in Dodge, 2011); therefore, writing in a literary way, conducting observations and interviews, and being personally involved in the study were critical to this approach and its aim.

Research Sites and Settings

In selecting the sites and participants, letters requesting access and permission to carry out study were drafted and presented to Principals and/or Heads of Department (HOD). With access granted, consent letters outlining the aim of the study and method were given to teachers in requesting their participation. A point to note here is that each teacher and institution (whenever mentioned) was given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Secondary-level institutions were selected because, at this level, there has been an increase in the number of special needs cases officially documented (Ministry of Education, 2017). Jamaica is

divided into fourteen geo-political areas or parishes; these schools are in. These parishes are grouped in different regions based on the MoESYI administrative offices island-wide, to which there are seven educational regions (Task Force, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2021). As such, each school represents different communities and cultures.

The observations were of some classroom sessions that were conducted face-to-face or online through Google Meet or Zoom. After conducting observations, the teachers were interviewed to gain feedback on what was observed and gain further insights into the teachers' understanding, experiences, competency level, and support of and with inclusive education. The interviews with the teachers were held online using Google Meet and Zoom at a time of mutual convenience.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The participants were teachers who had taught in Jamaica or are currently teaching in Jamaica for more than five years at the secondary level. The teachers were selected using a purposive homogeneous sampling method that gave way to the development of a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in the mind of the researcher, from the predetermined criterion that had been established (Cozby & Bates, 2020; Douglas, 2022). The five-year time frame was suitable because the policy on Special Education was brought before parliament less than five years ago, in 2019.

In carrying out a phenomenological study, Schuemann (2014) suggests that interviews can be done with up to ten individuals, and saturation can be achieved with 2 to 10 participants. Sixteen (16) teachers were selected from five of the seven educational regions in Jamaica.

Data Collection and Analysis

The methods utilised to collect the data were observations (6 video recordings of classes) and interviews. Six teachers provided either complete or snippets of video recordings showcasing their respective teaching sessions. Two of the six recordings were from online sessions, while the remaining four were from face-to-face teaching sessions. The two online sessions showed brief speaker spotlights of the students. These teaching sessions were in the content areas of Chemistry, Information Technology, English Language, Social Studies, Geography, and Mathematics.

The interviews were conducted virtually using Google Meet and Zoom online. The interviews were designed with semi-structured questions to guide the discussion. The questions were geared towards ascertaining teachers' understanding, experiences, feelings of competencies, and the support they receive. Five general questions were asked to ten teachers while the remaining six teachers were asked an additional question that referenced the video of the observed teaching session. The data collected from the video recordings were documented as field notes (highlighting the classroom activities, discussions, and setting), and the interviews were recorded as transcripts (dialogue format) using a computer. The data was collected during July and August 2023.

The following steps were used to assess the research study: Preparation, management, analysis, and interpretation. Each process enabled careful grouping and organization of the data to make the transition seamless into documentation. These included plans for saving and backup options, digital copies of notes, and interview transcripts. There were co-ordinations in the naming of all related documents. The times, dates, and locations were all recorded as critical information to the research as part of the protocols used.

After receiving and reviewing data collected multiple times, notes were made based on a general understanding of the data. This ensured that there would be aspects to compare or contrast while critically reading. Manual in vivo and descriptive coding techniques were used. According to Creswell (2014), in vivo coding is labelling categories with a term based on the participant's original language. Patel (2014) posited that descriptive coding summarises the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data in a word or noun.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To maintain the trustworthiness of the data collected, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexivity were the three main methods used. The validity of the interview protocol used was guaranteed by the supervising assessor, who gave meaningful suggestions relating to the clarity and relevance of the question items. The program director further signed off on the study. The consideration of access to the site and setting, as well as the knowledge of participants due to affiliation with the institution, is important. The permission letter to the principal and/or head of department and the consent letters to the teachers as formal letters of request and participation were sent out to ensure adequate preparation.

Although the participants were teachers, the choice of words was not too technical in representing the nature of this research. Ethical protocols of anonymity and confidentiality were maintained and upheld by assigning pseudonyms to the participants and the respective institutions of association where appropriate.

Methodological Limitations

There was a time limitation in conducting the data collection. The research study's time frame coincided with the academic year's closure in Jamaica. Subsequently, only six video recordings for six of the teachers' classes were observed. Also, due to the closure of the academic year, teachers were busy finalising exams and reports, which made availability to participate before summer break an initial challenge.

Another limiting factor was the sampling strategy selected, purposive homogeneous sampling. Although this strategy has predetermined criteria established by the researcher, as a type of nonprobability sampling, it generally does not accurately represent a population (Cozby and Bates, 2020), especially in this study, where more female teacher participants than males shared their experiences.

Even though these limitations existed, steps were taken to minimize their effects. The teachers who expressed willingness to participate after initial discussions were sent reminders, and a final interview date was arranged utilizing Jamaica/Beijing Time. As for the number of male participants, that was uncontrollable because only three expressed willingness to participate.

Findings

This research focused on exploring high school teachers' understanding, experiences, competencies, and received support with facilitating inclusive education. This section reports the key findings obtained from observation of video recordings and interviews conducted. Sixteen high school teachers across the island shared their understanding, experiences, feelings of competency, and the support they get from their respective schools. Table 1 describes the participants, specifically their gender, years of experience in teaching, and grade level currently teaching.

Table 1 Description of Participants

Participant	Gender	Years of Experience in Teaching	Grade(s) currently teaching
Abby	F	14	8, 10 & 11
Mary	F	19	7 & 8
Julie	F	20 +	10 – 13
James	M	12	9 – 13
Sarah	F	7	7 – 9
Jessica	F	30+	7 – 13
Carla	F	21+	7 – 11
Simone	F	9	9 – 12
Jennifer	F	8	9 – 13
Peter	M	15	9 – 13
Elizabeth	F	16	9 – 11
Suzette	F	31	9 – 12
Kayan	F	25	7, 8, 10 (City & Guild)
John	M	18	7 – 11
Angela	F	16	7 – 13
Jane	F	8	1 – 10

After observing these recordings, interviews were conducted to obtain additional data from the teachers who provided videos, and another set of interviews was carried out with the remaining ten teachers. The data received from both exercises were organised and analysed thematically. As a result, four main themes were identified.

These themes reflected the overarching aim of the research, objectives, and questions as captured in the observation and interview protocols. Appendices B, C, and D outline the details recorded for the

observation and the questions that guided the interviews. The themes identified from the classroom video recordings and the interviews were teachers' understanding of inclusive education, experiences with inclusive education, competency and training, and school support. Engagement activities, language and real-life examples, lesson and classroom arrangement, and teacher activities were included as part of teachers' experiences within the classroom as they strive to include all learners.

Teachers' understanding of Inclusive Education

The interviews with all sixteen teachers showed varying understandings of the phrase inclusive education. Some teachers also went into more specific details. Here are three examples:

Abby: *"more less abled cognitive students or physically challenged students mixed with more abled students in a classroom space."*

Sarah: *"It means including all students, despite whatever challenges they might have. Whether it's socio-economic challenges or disabilities that they might have. So, it's to include them in the lesson, get their participation to ensure they have access to what everyone is learning."*

Peter: *"it's not much different from what I get from differentiating, except umm it speaks to being more deliberate... being deliberate and ensuring that everyone is included in the differentiation. It's not that you're going to leave out anyone... it goes beyond that, beyond fast learners or slow learners. It's about everybody. I think something was mentioned about something about regardless of status; it's catering to everyone and making everyone a part of the lesson."*

John and Carla's understanding of inclusive education was a little different as they mentioned the emerging new groups with respect to gender orientations and other diversities.

John: *"I think inclusive in this time that we're in is going to include a few more variables soon. But, umm, in my understanding... everyone whether they are um physically challenged, whether they are you know visually impaired, or hearing impaired or they're just a little bit they are differently oriented."*

Carla: *"... I was wondering if it included these new trends, I don't want to call it trends, but for want of a better word, like you know, those students who maybe identify with different sexual types...um those new things like that... I have a student who identifies as pansexual."*

As demonstrated here, the teachers gave their views on inclusive education.

Teachers' descriptions of experiences with inclusive education

Classroom experiences can be unique from teacher to teacher. Additionally, with an inclusive education environment, those experiences may be more unique than before. Teachers shared their experiences with students with autism, heart disease, blindness, mental breakdowns, selective muteness, students from very rural areas, and volatile communities, to name a few.

They shared in their experiences that this classroom environment had on them:

1. Doing a lot of differentiation

Abby: *"Did a lot of differentiation to overcome challenge; some items were printed, integrated dance, and folk songs."*

2. Experiencing burnout because of the number of groups they had to teach.
3. Having to end a lesson abruptly to deal with the random outburst.

James: "The student just got up and started making sounds, I had to stop what I was doing."

4. Reading the room
5. Monitoring and assessing each class
6. Making a deliberate effort to reach males

Simone: "Sometimes the boys are not so active, so I make a deliberate effort to reach the males, as you saw in the video."

7. Reflect on practice and
8. Collaborating with parents

Engagement activity

Teachers Peter and Simone started their teaching sessions with engagement activities as part of what they described as the 5E Model. Simone started the lesson with a riddle in her English Language lesson on Memorandum. The following is a written excerpt from the recording of the activity:

Simone: "Who is bigger?... Mr. Big, Mrs. Big, or the baby?"

Student A: "The baby"

Simone: Who said that?

(Student A raised his hand)

Simone: Why do you say?... Because (moved towards the student while asking)

Student A: The baby is the ... (answer a bit muffled, and audio was not clear)

Simone: Alright, not really... but the baby is the answer. Who can guess why the baby is the answer?"

Class response: because...

Simone: "The riddle is Who is bigger?... Mr. Big, Mrs. Big, or the baby?" Why? The baby is a little bigger."

Class response: Ooohhh

Simone: The baby born will be bigger, too. It is a pun, a play on the word

After the riddle, Simone outlined the objectives of the lesson. Most students captured in the video looked eager to participate, and some gave answers. However, the audio for some of the students was not clear. The students who spoke were not close to the person doing the video recording. Simone's class had both male and female students.

Similarly, in his online Chemistry class on Alkanes and Alkenes, Peter engaged his students with a riddle or what he called a "joke" from a previous class.

Peter: "A hydrocarbon asked Siri why am I still single?... Siri activated the front camera and asked, is this hydrocarbon an alkane or an alkene... Justify your answer. This is where I want us to start today."

The students were not forthcoming with a response, so Peter continued with his lesson to focus on the reactions of Alkanes and Alkenes.

Language and Real-life Examples

Although the language of instruction in Jamaica is standard English, the teachers, from observation, reverted to the local dialect (patois) and simpler verbal sentence structure to convey the intended meaning. An example of this was demonstrated in an Information Technology class conducted by Jennifer on the topic of Input, Processing, and Output. During this lesson, Value Added Tax was used to demonstrate this concept.

Jennifer- "a bread cos' different from a salt 'mackeril', and a salt 'mackeril' cos' different from a sardine"

The students were more responsive after the language was simplified. They began to ask additional questions about the activity.

In addition to language, the teaching and learning process requires using appropriate and relevant examples for the lesson. Kayan, a mathematics teacher, used a physical scale in her teaching. In groups of four, the students used the scales to measure the items provided. Kayan's class consisted of both male and female students.

Other teachers also included real-life examples. In his lesson on Moles and Solutions, Peter used a daily example of "making tea". Although the student's face was not seen in the footage, the student gave the instructions on "making tea" while Peter demonstrated it. He then applied the concepts of making, taking, and creating a solution.

Classroom Arrangement and Teacher Activity

The video recordings of the classes that were held face-to-face showed that the students were arranged in groups as well as rows. There was a whiteboard present in the rooms. The classrooms are well ventilated with wide-frame windows that have burglar bars. The classroom walls have charts, pictures, and other decorative fixtures. See Appendix G for Figure G2

The teachers in the face-to-face classrooms were very active throughout their lessons. Simone and Kayan were two such teachers. During their respective sessions, they were seen with either an individual student or a group of students. They were not stationary.

Competency and training

The teachers commented on their competency in multiple ways. They used the 1 to 10 scale, degrees of good, work in progress, and learning as they go. One teacher expressed that sometimes she does not feel competent based on the context, especially in the inclusive context.

7, 7.5, and 8 were the general responses out of 10 for those who used the rating scale. While some teachers, like Abby, Angela, James, and John, commented that they are learning on the go or were working in progress. All teachers added that there is "Always room for improvement" and that their years of experience is what was allowing them to feel as competent as they do.

Each participant is a holder of a qualification in education. Whether it was a Diploma, a bachelor's degree, or a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education. All commented that specialized training is necessary. After additional probing, professional developments, seminars, and workshops were recommended to be organised by schools or the Ministry of Education, as training is needed for in-service teachers, while teachers in training are to do an extensive course on special or inclusive education. Jane stated, "In-service teachers should do a year-long course in which there are frequent assessments and evaluations of progress." John, in his response, commented that it should not be at any additional cost to the teacher.

Support given by the Schools

The respective schools' support, based on the teachers' interviews, varied. Julie, Jessica, Elizabeth, Carla, and John mentioned that often they had to spend their personal funds on either activity, lunch, or other materials needed to assist the student or in the lesson delivery. Julie went further to say that her school plant, as it is, cannot accommodate any child who uses a wheelchair.

Testing of students, follow-up from administration, parental, and community support were other areas that were mentioned where support is lacking.

Jane: "the testing done are not adequate, as the results are not interpreted before being returned to the school. So, the schools would get back the results and not know what to do or how to move forward."

Simone and Kayan were among the teachers who spoke about administrators and other leaders not following up after seminars to see whether their new knowledge is being implemented in the classroom practice. Kayan went on to say, "certificates should be given, not only for participation but for practice."

As for parental and community support, these stakeholders must be educated on inclusive education to help, as Abby shared in her interview. There must be a change in the awareness and mindset of each community member, a view that Jane shared while she reflected on her attempts to host seminars with parents and community members, which proved futile in the interview session.

Discussion

This study was embarked upon to explore inclusive education in Jamaica – as part of the Policy on Special Education – high school teachers' understanding, experiences, competencies, and received support to answer the following questions:

1. What is teachers' understanding of inclusive education?
2. How do teachers describe their experiences with inclusive education?
3. How competent do teachers feel in teaching for inclusive education? And

4. How do schools support teachers in implementing inclusive education?

The data collected suggest that (i) teachers' understanding of inclusive education varied with respect to which groups were considered; (ii) teachers' inclusive experiences were unique and with different groups of students; (iii) teachers' felt competent in teaching in an inclusive environment that they attributed to years of experience in the teaching profession; and (iv) support given by school's administration, parents and community were minimal and teachers funded most of resources from their personal funds.

Teachers' Understanding of Inclusive Education

After examining the data collected and the literature reviewed, the teachers' understanding of inclusive education coincided with the UNESCO's definition that was utilised in the draft of the Policy on Special Education Jamaica. While the literature talks about the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional nature of inclusive education, it still considers its core component, education for each learner (Mitchell, 2015; Norwich, 2022). Therefore, teachers do have a fair understanding of inclusive education. Additionally, with new groups and orientations being identified, teachers soon must start making even more adjustments.

Teachers' Description of their Experiences with Inclusive Education

The teachers encountered inclusive education differently. Mangope et al. (2018) connected training with teaching experiences, whereas the teachers talked about the different subgroups under consideration in inclusive education. The autistic, the blind, rural, urban situations, and mental breakdowns, to name some examples. The interactions within these groups add to the multi-dimensions and the role of the teacher here in these classrooms. Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory is crucial in facilitating the development and creation of a system that posits that all learners can learn through interactions. The Policy on Special Education in Jamaica, based on the NSC, which recommends differentiation, was also what the teachers reported to be doing a lot of. On the other hand, teachers have also experienced burnout after receiving many classes for which they must cater to multiple needs. A teacher who receives many of these classes implies that there may be an insufficient number of teachers who are competent in teaching these groups to ensure that each learner has a chance to reach their full potential.

Teachers' Feeling of Competence in Teaching for Inclusive Education

The teachers attributed their overall competence to their years in the teaching profession, even as they are learning on the go, and as one teacher puts it, each student presents a different situation. Even though they did not have the specialised skillset to meet the needs of all their learners, years of teaching allowed them to hone other skills, such as assessing and monitoring the students. Since there is always a first day of work in any profession, training cannot be negated. Specialised training could further increase competency.

Teachers would be more abreast of the specialties and specific suitable interventions, especially in mainstream settings. Both new and in-service teachers would benefit immensely. Teachers' mindset,

attitudes, beliefs, and patterns can shift as they will be more and more equipped to address every learner (Marimuthu and Cheong, 2015).

Support Given to Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education

The draft of the Policy on Special Education in Jamaica stipulates some levels and provisions of support that should be given to teachers in mainstream high schools. These provisions include education and training, parental support, Ministry of Education officials, and other key stakeholders (Ministry of Education, Jamaica, 2017). Other than training, teachers need adequate resources to facilitate the needs of their learners. Even though school will provide classroom space, specialised charts, devices, manipulatives, and realia are needed to enrich the teaching and learning process further, thus appealing to the learners' interests, and making inclusive education a success (Bariffe & Pittas, 2021; Marimuthu and Cheong, 2015). Since support should be given as the policy draft stipulates, someone should be held accountable for non-compliance of these regulations.

Stone (2012) stated that enforcing rules begins with monitoring, which is to be done proactively by those who are qualified in the respective areas. This implies insufficient technical support to ensure that the relevant stipulations are being carried out appropriately. Samms (2017), Spencer-Ernandez and Edwards-Kerr (2017) highlighted that there are not enough qualified persons in this field. From this study, if teachers receive specialized training, they can now become a part of the well-needed team of experts that can ensure positive experiences, students reaching their full potential despite their situations, and the rules and regulations will work overtime (Stone, 2012).

Concluding remark

In closing, this study focused on exploring the Policy on Special Education in Jamaica: Teachers' experiences with inclusive education. The key findings given below were in response to the research questions geared towards teachers' understanding of inclusive education, teachers' description of their experiences, feelings of competence, and support given by schools:

1. Teachers' understanding of inclusive education varied in context and extent based on the groups that were considered.
2. Teachers' inclusive experiences are unique with different groups of students.
3. Teachers' felt competent in teaching in an inclusive environment, which was generally attributed to years of experience in the teaching profession and not training. Specialised training was strongly recommended and
4. Support given by the school's administration, parents, and community was minimal, and teachers funded most of the resources from their personal finances.

This study has brought the views of 16 teachers employed in different high schools across Jamaica to bring awareness and highlight areas of concern, with hopes of inciting a change in the practice of the Policy on Special Education. The policymakers and other crucial stakeholders can be informed of the

context and provide the training and resources necessary to comply with the standards set in writing, which were negotiated.

Although this study was done in what can be considered a short time frame, with the majority of the participants being female teachers, the wealth of data collected is still valuable. The teachers expressed their understanding, experiences, feelings of competency, and support or the lack thereof that they go through to ensure they can educate each child before them. Future research is needed to explore each education region in Jamaica further and determine what is obtained there with respect to inclusive education. The research can also include earlier education levels, looking at early, adequate, and efficient testing. In doing so, the researchers can do so over a longer period, a longitudinal study, and follow-up with the schools' progress.

Finally, a training programme organised in all institutions with experts monitoring the progress of the student teachers or in-service teachers is recommended. While teachers commented that years of experience taught them how to deal with situations, having the specific skills for varying specialities is crucial where intervention is necessary. The trainees are to be assessed at least three times in a term in their respective context for consistency in using the strategies learned in the programme. As a result, meaningful progress can be made, and teachers are certified. These teachers, over time, can be enlisted among the experts to continue with the development of the nation's teachers and students to achieve inclusive education and make Vision 2030 a success.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table 2 Educational Regional Breakdown in Jamaica

Region	Parishes
1	Kingston, St. Andrew
2	St. Thomas, Portland, St. Mary
3	St. Ann, Trelawny
4	St. James, Hanover, Westmoreland
5	St. Elizabeth, Manchester
6	St. Catherine
7	Clarendon

Appendix B

Observation Protocol

Date: _____ Location: _____ Time: _____

Grade: _____ Teacher: _____ (Pseudonym)

Lesson/Topic:

Observation and Descriptive Notes

Participants:

Classroom:

Activities:

Reflective Notes

Appendix C

Interview Questions (Set 1)

1. Can you give a summary of your teaching profession to date? (Years of teaching, level of qualification, subject/content speciality, grade(s) taught and/or teaching)
2. Can you give a step-by-step description of how your teaching session is organized?
3. (i) Are you familiar with the phrase "Inclusive Education?"
 - (ii) How do you understand inclusive education?
 - (iii) Do you think inclusive education is relevant to today's classroom?
 - (iv) Are there students in your class who are from disadvantaged backgrounds or need any kind of special attention? Please tell me more.
 - (v) Can you share one of these teaching experiences?
 - (vi) How did you plan for this (these) teaching sessions? What considerations are made?
 - (vii) Were you able to do anything to make your teaching more inclusive to these students?

****ONLY PROVIDE DEFINITION IF PARTICIPANT HAS NO IDEA AT ALL / UNABLE TO SAY ANYTHING**

(UNESCOs, 2009, p.4, defines inclusive education as a process that involves the transformation of schools and other centres of learning to cater for all children – including boys and girls, students from ethnic and language minorities, rural populations, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and those with disabilities and difficulties learning, and to provide learning opportunities for all youth and adults as well) **

- (viii) Do you experience challenges developing and/or executing the plan? Please provide some examples. How/(What) did you (do to) overcome the challenges faced?
4. (i) How competent do you feel teaching for inclusive education?

(ii) Are there specific skills that you possess that enables you to adapt inclusive education?

Or do you believe specialised training is necessary for achieving inclusive education?

(ix) What type/and or level of specialised training do you think is needed?

5. Does your school/institution support teachers in implementing inclusive education? (Please tell me more) (what/how support is given/offered?)

Appendix D

Interview Questions (Set 2)

1. Can you give a summary of your teaching profession to date? (Years of teaching, level of qualification, subject/content speciality, grade(s) taught and/or teaching)
2. Can you give a step-by-step description of how your teaching session is organized?
3. (i) Are you familiar with the phrase "Inclusive Education?"
 - (ii) How do you understand inclusive education?
 - (iii) Do you think inclusive education is relevant to today's classroom?
 - (iv) Are there students in your class who are from disadvantaged backgrounds or need any kind of special attention? Please tell me more.
 - (v) Were you able to do anything to make your teaching more inclusive for these students?

****ONLY PROVIDE DEFINITION IF PARTICIPANT HAS NO IDEA AT ALL / UNABLE TO SAY ANYTHING**

(UNESCOs, 2009, p.4, defines inclusive education as a process that involves the transformation of schools and other centres of learning to cater for all children – including boys and girls, students from ethnic and language minorities, rural populations, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and those with disabilities and difficulties learning, and to provide learning opportunities for all youth and adults as well) **

4. (i) I have watched a video of your lesson, and I would like to know more. Were there students in this lesson who needed special attention? If so, what were their needs? Can you share one of these teaching experiences?
 - (ii) Were you able to plan for the lesson so that these students can all participate? How did you plan for this (these) teaching sessions? What considerations are made?
 - (iii) If not, what challenged or prevented you from doing so?
 - (iv) Do you experience challenges developing and/or executing the plan? Please provide some examples. How/(What) did you (do to) overcome the challenges faced?
5. (i) How competent do you feel teaching for inclusive education?

(ii) Are there specific skills that you possess that enables you to adapt inclusive education?

Or do you believe specialised training is necessary for achieving inclusive education?

(v) What type/and or level of specialised training do you think is needed?

6. Does your school/institution support teachers to implement inclusive education? (Please tell me more) (what/how support is given/offered?)